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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 KUALA LUMPUR 001764

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TAGS: PREL PGOV PINS MOPS TH MY
SUBJECT: "NO TEARS FOR THAKSIN" -- INITIAL MALAYSIAN
REACTION TO THAI COUP

Classified By: Classified By: Political Section Chief Mark D. Clark rea
sons 1.4 (b and d).

¶1. (S) Summary: Malaysian officials and politicians reacted with ambivalence on September 20 to news of Thailand's military coup, shedding no tears for the widely disliked Thaksin, but expressing disapproval at the use of force to change their neighbor's government. Malaysians, beginning with Prime Minister Abdullah, voiced their expectation that the Thai military would move quickly to restore democratic civilian rule. Armed Forces Chief Admiral Anwar and various Malaysian politicians expressed hope that Thaksin's ouster would bring better peace prospects for their Muslim Malay kinsmen in southern Thailand. In the meantime, Malaysian police reportedly stepped up their readiness at border points. End Summary.

¶2. (U) Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi, speaking to the press in New York on September 19, said he was "shocked" by the coup, noting that a forcible change in government would be unpopular compared with democratic change through elections. He also pointed out, however, that the Thai military had mentioned its intention to return quickly to democracy. "That is an acknowledgment that we hope can be implemented as soon as possible, and if possible, an election that has been planned can be carried out at an appropriate time," Abdullah stated.

¶3. (C) Malaysian interlocutors in conversations with us September 20 expressed some ambivalence toward the coup, reflecting both concern over the event of a military takeover in a neighboring country and also the general dislike many Malaysians have for Thaksin related to his perceived heavy-handed approach to the violence in Thailand's ethnic Malay and Muslim south. Abdul Razak Baginda, a close advisor to Deputy Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak, told Polcouns on September 20, "People may not like Thaksin, but a coup is a setback for Thai democracy. Malaysians will be happy to see him (Thaksin) go, though." In response to Polcouns' query, Wan Ahmad Farid, a political secretary to Prime Minister Abdullah, expressed no anxiety over events in Thailand and struck a comic tone: "The Thai's change their government as often as the Queen changes her guards."

¶4. (S) Malaysian Chief of the Armed Forces Admiral Anwar, in a September 20 conversation with the DATT, described the coup as Thailand's internal affair. He held that the coup would not affect military cooperation between Malaysia and Thailand, and in fact it offered the potential to increase such cooperation in the future. Anwar was hopeful that Thaksin's ouster would lead to a new, more effective strategy to address the violence in southern Thailand. He also

expected the Thai military to quickly transition to a civilian government. Noting that he was speaking personally, Admiral Anwar implied that Thaksin had brought the coup on himself by mishandling the crisis in the Muslim south and by failing to listen to his generals.

¶ 15. (U) An official of the opposition Pan-Islam Party of Malaysia (PAS), youth wing leader Salahuddin Ayub, expressed his party's hope that the change in the Thai government would result in a different policy toward Thailand's Muslim south. On September 20, Salahuddin told reporters, "Although (Thai General) Sonthi, a Muslim, is not seen as acting on behalf of the Muslims in southern Thailand and is believed to have carried out the coup at the behest of the King, it is hoped that with the removal of Thaksin, the atrocities and sufferings of Muslims in the south can be stopped as soon as possible and negotiations towards a just peace deal can be initiated." He added that, "the hatred of Muslims throughout the world towards the Thai government can be reduced if immediate actions are initiated to stop the spilling of blood in southern Thailand."

¶ 16. (U) Parliament opposition leader Lim Kit Siang, former chairman and senior leader of the Democratic Action Party (DAP), released a statement on September 20 entitled, "No tears for Thaksin but tears for Thai democracy." Lim referenced accusations against Thaksin of "rampant corruption, abuses of power and subversion of democratic institutions," while also stating that the military coup had undone "decades of Thai progress in terms of democracy, human rights and the rule of law." Lim called for the immediate restoration of democratic and constitutional institutions.

¶ 17. (C) The September 20 edition of Malaysia's largest English-language daily newspaper, The Star, reported that

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flights, buses and trains bound for Thailand had all kept to their schedules overnight and remained unimpeded in their journeys into Thailand. The Thai Embassy also told us that the border situation remained normal. However, The Star's bureau chief in the border state of Kelantan, Ian McIntyre, informed us that his police sources were preparing for "a possible flood of people from Southern Thailand into Kelantan," in the event of an intensification of the Thai military's crackdown on suspected Muslim militants. Malay language newspapers Utusan Malaysia and Berita Harian reported that Malaysian police have tightened security checks along the border. During the afternoon of September 20, the deputy police chief in the border state of Kelantan was quoted in radio reports as saying he had temporarily increased police readiness at all stations near the border with Thailand, and that his forces were "preparing for contingencies" related to the coup.

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